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ABSTRACT

The role of the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) in the certification of English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teachers is discussed. The professional association has been considering taking on a certification role to reduce discrimination against non-native speakers trained to teach ESL, sometimes passed over in favor of untrained native English-speakers. A number of arguments against the associations' adopting a certification role are examined, including: the likelihood of TESOL's ultimately adopting a program accreditation role; financial problems faced by the association; difficulties in development and assessment of appropriate criteria for certification; controversy over the value of teacher training versus teaching experience; competition with master's degree programs; legal concerns over discrimination against teachers not certified by TESOL; the form of certification, whether at a single competency level or several; documentation of experiential learning; and a code of ethics or professionalism, a common element in other certification programs. It is recommended that all such issues be addressed when considering TESOL's role in teacher certification. (MSE)

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The TESOL Certificate: A View from Outside the U.S.

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The subject of a TESOL certificate as a profession-wide credential came up several years ago, partly in response to requests from members of TESOL. In particular, some overseas affiliates wanted certification for professionally trained non-native speakers of English who are subject to hiring discrimination in their own countries where native speakers, often regardless of training, are preferred. In 1989, the Executive Board of TESOL was also asked to respond to efforts of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) in the United States.

Some advocates of a TESOL certificate argue that if TESOL certifies qualified practitioners, then programs would begin to hire only certified individuals and the unqualified people would find themselves out of the job market. Once a critical mass of certified teachers is available, language programs in the private sector would seek to hire them to draw more students even if other concerns, such as quality programs, were not the motivations. Then there would be a backwash effect on the public schools in various countries as well, leading to the TESOL certificate being recognized internationally.

Furthermore, there is the argument that one characteristic of a profession is that it enforces standards for training and for employment practices, such as hiring and the quality of programs. Following this argument, TESOL, as the main international organization, would become a body that certifies individuals and accredits training programs as well as language preparation programs internationally.

The issue is contentious and not without problems. First, TESOL, as you undoubtedly know, is not in the best financial shape. Implementing a TESOL certificate might generate more funds as individuals applying for the certificate would pay a fee, but it is a risk and TESOL might lose money, at least initially. TESOL would have to establish the certification procedure, allocate staff resources, and print forms and brochures.

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Second, there is the question of the criteria for evaluating an applicant's credentials. The easiest way is to require formal training, which would imply that an M.A. in TESL/TEFL or the equivalent in other contexts (e.g., an advanced RSA, the PGCE in Britain) would be required. However, many people in various parts of the world cannot go to the U.S., Great Britain or Australia to study for a year or more. Other forms of training could include documented attendance at a convention like TESOL, teleconferences, or participation in workshops. A certification program would have to look at competencies in subfields of TESOL, the kinds of competencies which most M.A. programs seek to develop.

Third, there are political questions. Some very well-known people in TESOL have little or no training as language teachers and understandably are reluctant to agree that some form of certification is necessary. These people, however, could be exempted from some of the requirements for a TESOL certificate based on their experience. Others claim that one cannot train teachers and that teaching is an "art"; requiring certification would keep people out of the field who could contribute very positively to TESL/TEFL teaching. Nevertheless, to teach mathematics or literature one has to be trained and certified. Why are language teachers different? The trained person is more likely to do a better job at teaching than the untrained one.

Furthermore, some argue, a TESOL certificate might compete with M.A. programs; fewer people might get the M.A. if they could get official recognition as professionals through other means. Still another concern is that a TESOL certification would lead to bureaucratization and a decrease in the energy and creativity that have characterized this field for the past twenty years.

Fourth, there are genuine legal concerns. An individual who is denied a certificate might try to sue TESOL for discrimination or an M.A. program for not providing a program good enough to get the certificate. Other accreditation and certification organizations, such as the British Council, do have legal advisors for their certification programs.

Finally, in spite of TESOL's attempts to be an international organization, it is still very much American, based in the U.S., set up and run by Americans. Everything it does reflects the cultural context in which it is embedded. Education in the U.S. is not controlled by a ministry of education and control from a central, federal body is not welcomed, even fought against with great conviction. My experiences in other parts of the world indicate that most of the rest of the world looks at this area of life differently; control from the top is the norm and considered necessary for change to occur. I would argue that some of the reluctance TESOL has shown towards questions of certification as well as accreditation of programs reflects the American cultural context.

Even if the Executive Board agrees to go ahead with a professional certificate, they must decide what form the certificate should take. Should there be one? Should there be three or four at different levels, for example, one for untrained applicants to encourage them to seek training, another for those who seek additional training, and still another for those with some training? There would have to be clear criteria for each level and guidelines for providing documentation on experiential learning to support an applicant's credentials. Should there be a code of ethics? In reading materials from other organizations that certify their members, CPS members found that professional behavior is addressed as part of certification.

These are just some of the issues that will require much discussion and careful long term planning. We do not want to see TESOL become an exclusive organization. On the other hand, we may have become big enough and mature enough to make clear public statements about what our profession means. Certificates and accreditation are just such public moves. We must assess needs and build support both inside and outside the organization, especially internationally where the need for a certificate might be greater and a certificate will be more likely to be recognized, in spite of the continuing shortage of trained teachers. Thus I suggest that the primary purpose of such a certificate is official recognition of a professional, committed TESL/TEFL teacher. It may also help in creating a sense of

solidarity among those working in the field and an awareness of professional responsibility towards others.

Virginia LoCastro is immediate past co-chair of the TESOL Committee on Professional Standards.